

# IMAGINARY GREECE

*The contexts of mythology*

RICHARD BUXTON

*Professor of Greek Language and Literature,  
University of Bristol*



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# CONTENTS

<i>List of plates</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xv
Introduction	I

## PART ONE: NARRATIVE CONTEXTS

1	Telling tales	9
2	Myths in performance	18
	From the cradle ...	18
	The songs of youth	21
	Stories for citizens	27
	... to the grave	40
3	Performance into text	45
4	Images in context	53
	Archaic and Classical Greece	53
	Collection and domestication	63

## PART TWO: RE-IMAGINING THE WORLD

5	Cookery and recipes	69
6	Landscape	80

	To the mountain	81
	Other territories: sea, cave and spring	97
7	Family	114
	Wives, webs and wiles	114
	Fathers, sons and brothers	130
8	Religion	145
	The nature of divinity	145
	Telling and acting	151
	Believing in myths	155
PART THREE: WHAT WAS THE POINT?		
9	The actors' perceptions	169
10	Modern perspectives	182
	Reflectors and constructors	182
	Paradigms (and shoes)	193
	Mapping	198
	Explanation	207
	Psychology, emotion and (again) pluralism	213
	Epilogue	219
	<i>Bibliography</i>	221
	<i>Index</i>	237

## PLATES

*Frontispiece.* Paris greeted by Hermes. (See below, Plate 7.)

1. Gorgo (*LIMC*, 'Gorgo', no. 271): Syracuse, Mus. Reg. *Photo*: Hirmer. page 19
2. Birth of Helen: Bari, Mus. Arch. 3899. *Photo*: Soprintendenza Archeologica della Puglia, Taranto. 35
3. Departing warrior: London, Brit. Mus. F 158. *Photo*: courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. 55
4. Two funerary *lekythoi*. (a) London, Brit. Mus. D 65. *Photo*: as 3. (b) Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen 2777. *Photo*: Blow up. 56-7
5. Centaur and Lapith: London, Brit. Mus. *Photo*: Hirmer. 59
6. The landscape of the *oros*. *Photo*: Professor P. M. Warren. 82
7. Paris and Hermes: Antikensammlung Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 2182. *Photo*: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz. 91
8. Two faces of the sea. (a) Fishing: Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum 3727. *Photo*: Museum (Bittermann). (b) Europa: London, Brit. Mus. F 184. *Photo*: as 3. 98-9
9. The sea-shore near Pylos, S. W. Greece. *Photo* reproduced from Karpodini-Dimitriadi 1981, pl. 131. 102
10. Real and imaginary caves. (a) The cave of Franchthi, in the Argolid. *Photo* reproduced from Karpodini-Dimitriadi 1981, pl. 35. (b) Cave monster: National Museum, Copenhagen, Department of Near Eastern and Classical Antiquities 834. *Photo*: Niels Elswing. 104-5

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| 11. Women at a fountain: London, Brit. Mus. B 334. <i>Photo</i> : as 3.   | 110   |
| 12. Telemachos and Penelope: Chiusi, Mus. Civ. 1831. <i>Photo</i> reproduced from Kraiker 1958, pl. 42.                       | 123   |
| 13. Polyneikes and Eriphyle: Lecce, Mus. Prov. 570. <i>Photo</i> : Foto Guido, Lecce.   | 125   |
| 14. Covering the corpse of Ajax: New York, Metr. Mus. L.69-11.35 (ex Bareiss Collection). <i>Photo</i> : Getty Museum (1983). | 126   |
| 15. Odysseus and Kirke: Oxford, Ashmolean Mus. G 249. <i>Photo</i> : Museum.  | 127   |
| 16. Pelops and Hippodameia: Arezzo, Mus. Civ. 1460. <i>Photo</i> reproduced from Kraiker 1958, pl. 51.                        | 130-1 |
| 17. Jaunty Centaur with pine-branch: Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum 63.104. <i>Photo</i> : Museum.                         | 203   |
| 18. Achilles and Cheiron: Paris, Louvre G 186. <i>Photo</i> : Musée du Louvre.  | 206   |
| 19. Ajax prepares for suicide: Boulogne, Musée Communal 558. <i>Photo</i> : Devos.  | 217   |
| 20. Satyr-as-Herakles: London, Brit. Mus. E 539. <i>Photo</i> : as 3.   | 218   |

# *Introduction*

Greek myths look familiar enough: we seem always to have known about Oidipous, Elektra, Medea. But a moment's consideration of the question, 'How do we go about interpreting a Greek myth?' is enough to make us pause. For twenty-five centuries, thinkers of rare insight and imagination have adopted a bewildering range of strategies towards the stories, and good reasons for preferring one approach to another can seem hard to come by. Yet the last thirty years have seen an explosion of interest in mythology.

Structuralism led the way. The French took less time than others more positivistically minded to realise the value of the analogy between myth and language, and to dedicate themselves to analysing the structure, the systematic organisation, which gave myths meaning. It was this structure which J.-P. Vernant, P. Vidal-Naquet and M. Detienne claimed, with one or both eyes on Lévi-Strauss, to be bringing to light.<sup>1</sup> Vernant's account of Hermes and Hestia is the classic illustration: the two divinities can only be fully understood if seen as complementary in relation to the Greeks' perception of space – to the goddess of the fixed, central hearth corresponds the boundary-crosser, the god who moves to and fro.<sup>2</sup> Despite nagging doubts about the indifference to history which sometimes crept into this work, and about the tendency to treat each variant as equally significant (even if mythology is like a language, it may still contain spelling mistakes), Paris was the only place to be.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Some key works: Detienne 1977, Vernant 1980 and 1983, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1981, Vidal-Naquet 1986.      <sup>2</sup> Vernant 1983, pp. 127–75.

<sup>3</sup> On attitudes towards history, it is important to distinguish between the members of the trio: cf. the Introduction to Gordon 1981.

Those doubts were expressed, in language of formidable compression, by Walter Burkert, who sought to reintroduce history – but history of an exceptionally *longue durée*. For Burkert, Greek myths had to be understood in relation to mankind's biological nature.<sup>4</sup> 'Programs of action' grounded in human biology found a dramatised continuity in ritual, which was in turn reflected and paralleled in mythology. With *Homo Necans*, ritual returned to occupy the central position which it had left with Sir James Frazer and Jane Harrison. In the work of Jan Bremmer and Fritz Graf, the emphasis on rites has continued. While their work may lack the vast chronological perspective built into Burkert's vision, their use of, in particular, initiation ceremonies as a means of decoding Greek myths has deservedly claimed attention. In thirty years' time the vogue for initiation will certainly be seen to have been overdone, but there is a good deal of staying power in analyses such as Bremmer's of the scapegoat and maenadism, where a prising apart of the elements pertaining to myth and ritual permits a clearer view of the interrelationship between these two modes.<sup>5</sup>

Several other strategies have affected current thinking about Greek myths. One approach, concentrating on the distinctions and overlaps between oral and written communication, has highlighted the contrast between myths in performance and myths as texts, and towards the difficulties embedded in that contrast.<sup>6</sup> With a different but not unrelated emphasis – though the preferred explanation for change is located this time in politics rather than in media of communication – a series of works by G. E. R. Lloyd has probed the interrelations between the areas conventionally segregated as 'myth' and 'science', raising fundamental questions about the types of explanation characteristic of each.<sup>7</sup> Next, in direct lineal descent from structuralism's stress on significant contrast, we have a series of studies

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Burkert 1979, pp. 14–18.

<sup>5</sup> Bremmer 1983a and 1984a. Graf's approach is illustrated by Graf 1985b.

<sup>6</sup> See Goody and Watt 1963, Finnegan 1977, Goody 1977, Havelock 1982, Detienne 1988. Havelock's views about the essential orality of Greek culture until the arrival of Plato have been questioned by, for example, Pöhlmann 1988 and Kullmann in Kullmann and Reichel 1990, pp. 319–20. <sup>7</sup> Lloyd 1966, 1979, 1983, 1987, 1990. See below, pp. 207–11.



preoccupied with the notion of 'otherness' and 'difference'.<sup>8</sup> Then there has been deconstruction, with its playful syntax, its contrived obscurity, and its tendency to elide the difficulty of assigning some meaning into the impossibility of assigning any. But there is a baby as well as bath water: the certainty with which structuralists and others have spoken of Nature and Culture, of The Greeks and Greek Thought, has been deflated in favour of a healthy awareness of differences. In the spirit if not the style of deconstruction, M. Detienne and then C. Calame have shown just how problematic is the category of myth(ology): 'Very probably invented and at all events articulated by the Greeks, *muthos* was for them neither a type of narrative, nor an ethnocentric concept, nor a mode of thought. It was emphatically *not* an indigenous category.'<sup>9</sup>

Three more interpretative developments may be mentioned. The first originates with critics working under what may crudely be called a 'feminist' umbrella. Thanks to them, a beginning has been made in the attempt to coax a voice from that half of the population which had remained almost mute; the fact that it is phenomenally difficult to answer questions about women's perceptions of and through the myths of antiquity does not make the questions any less worth pressing.<sup>10</sup> Then, there has been an advance in the sophistication with which visual representations are interpreted. For long regarded as mere illustrations of written texts, they are increasingly being seen as symbolic statements in their own right, whose significance has, where possible, to be teased out by replacing them within an iconographical series (structuralism and differences again), and within their functional contexts.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the question of *believing* in myths has been highlighted in a stimulating book by Paul Veyne.<sup>12</sup> The issue raised

<sup>8</sup> Zeitlin in Euben 1986, pp. 101–41 (Thebes as 'other' to Athens), Hartog 1988, Hall 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Calame 1990a, p. 29 (my translation), following where Detienne 1986 went before. (The author's review of the latter in *JHS* 103 (1983) 193–4 was, I now think, too unwelcoming. But note the criticisms of Detienne in Brisson 1982.)

<sup>10</sup> Among a torrent of publications one may note Pomeroy 1975, Loraux 1981, 1987 and 1989, Cameron and Kuhrt 1983, Halperin, Winkler and Zeitlin 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Examples are Moret 1984, Bérard et al. 1989, Lissarrague 1990, Sourvinou-Inwood 1991.

<sup>12</sup> Veyne 1988.

cannot be dodged, even though the abstruse manner in which Veyne chooses to approach it does not command universal support.

In spite (or because) of the fashionableness and obvious fertility of the topic, there is in some quarters, in Britain at least, a residual feeling that to treat mythology as a distinct area of study, as opposed to either a byway of traditional classical philology or (merely) that from which philosophy and history manfully ‘emerged’,<sup>13</sup> is a gambit bound up with Theory, Methodology and The Continent, and is thus *not quite sound*.<sup>14</sup> I believe that those who hold this view are misguided (cf. the ostrich), but at the same time they too are touching on a genuine problem: is mythology an autonomous territory, or merely a modern category stuck on to recalcitrant ancient data?

Every book is a product of its time, and mine inevitably reflects the developments just outlined; indeed, part of my purpose has been to incorporate the results of the best contemporary work. But I wanted, in addition, to stress one particular aspect of the subject which seems to me fundamental: the need to interpret myths *in context*. I make no contribution to the quest undertaken by some for the supposed transhistorical or universal meaning of myths, for I suppose such a quest to be aimless; at the very least, its results are unverifiable. But to locate the stories within the largely peasant communities in which they were told; to analyse narrative contexts and social contexts; to chart the distance travelled between narrative fantasy and everyday life – all this seems to me worthwhile and, no less importantly, possible.

My title is designed to reflect these emphases. In ‘imaginary’ the reader may detect an echo of the French/Italian *imaginaire/immaginario*. But I do not want to associate myself with any one approach which may have appropriated these terms; not, especially, with the

<sup>13</sup> The negative connotations are sometimes spelled out, as in Barnes 1987, p. 58: ‘The other reports of Pherekydes’ work [sc. as against ‘the two most “philosophical” pieces’] contain nothing but fanciful mythology.’ Cf. also p. 60, where the linking of the Presocratic philosopher Thales with Near Eastern mythological parallels is discouraged: ‘to me Thales seems to live in a different and *more luminous* world’ (my italics – it is the imagery which gives the game away).

<sup>14</sup> This is the consistent subtext of Kirk 1970, even if, laudably, it brings in a wide range of comparative material. Cf. the criticisms in B. Vickers 1973, Appendix II.

attempt to classify archetypal symbols, valid *semper et ubique*, advocated by G. Durand and his school.<sup>15</sup> Nor, emphatically, do I wish to suggest that myths are generated by ‘the imagination’, in the sense of a particular mental faculty, perhaps even to be differentiated from ‘reason’; the existence of such a faculty is quite chimerical. What I do want to do is to allude at the outset to one of my central themes: the distance and interplay between the imaginary world of the stories and the (real?) world of the tellers. (The methodological problems raised by this distinction will occupy us later.) As for my subtitle, ‘the contexts of mythology’ should be taken in two ways. In Part One I deal with narrative contexts, in Part Two with social contexts in the broadest sense. Part Three draws on both the narrower and the wider type of context in order to re-examine the functional aspect of Greek mythology.

I hope that this book will be read by students, and I would like to think that scholars too will find something to interest them in it. But I have an additional aim. Greek mythology remains popular amongst the reading public. Yet some common assumptions (e.g. that the most exciting question to ask about Jason is ‘Did he exist?’) are badly in need of revision. Moreover, the form in which this readership often gains access to the stories – for example, in the English-speaking world, via H. J. Rose’s *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* and Robert Graves’ *The Greek Myths* – can give a startlingly distorted view of the sort of interpretation which would be considered persuasive by contemporary scholars working on the tales. Rose, for example, attributes the differences between Greek and Roman mythology to the fact that the imagination of the Greeks was ‘active’, while that of the ancient Italians was ‘narrow and sluggish’; he regards Greek myths of the monstrous as imports (‘in all this hideous brood we may safely recognize the influence of non-Greek fancy, chiefly Anatolian, on the Greek mind’); and he persistently devalues the ‘obscure’ or ‘late’ or ‘purely local’ story – truly a history of mythology written from the winners’ standpoint.<sup>16</sup> Graves, for his part, follows a Foreword about hallucinatory mushrooms with an Introduction dominated by The

<sup>15</sup> Durand 1992, pp. viii and xviii.

<sup>16</sup> Rose 1958, pp. 1 and 31.

Great Goddess ('Early Greek mythology is concerned, above all else, with the changing relations between the queen and her lovers'), and his distinction between 'true myth' and twelve other sorts of tale simply cannot be justified from ancient texts.<sup>17</sup> I hope, in short, that the present book will reach the wider audience too. To that end I have tried to cut down the jargon with which scholars like to armour-plate themselves. Most things worth saying about Greek myths can be expressed clearly.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, a word about chronological limits. The earliest examples of mythological narrative to which I refer are from the eighth century BC, to which Homer and Hesiod may reasonably be dated. Deciding how late to go is more difficult. The poets Oppian and Nonnos are recognisably composing in the same tradition as their predecessors of a thousand years earlier; and Pausanias, writing in the second century AD, is the richest single literary source for Greek ritual and many of its accompanying stories. I shall frequently refer to this later material, but it cannot be denied that the world had greatly changed by the time Pausanias decided to present the Greeks themselves as an object of curiosity.<sup>19</sup> The principal focus of this book, then, is the Archaic, Classical and early Hellenistic periods down to the middle of the third century BC. By that date the growing interest of Romans in using Greek culture had inaugurated a fresh direction in the transmission of myths. By the time that Fabius Pictor and Naevius relate the tale of Aeneas' arrival in Latium, the history of Greek myth-telling has become inseparable from the history of the Romans' approach to Greek civilisation;<sup>20</sup> and that is beyond our scope here.

<sup>17</sup> Graves 1960, pp. 16 and 12.

<sup>18</sup> I am aware that to identify obscurity in others is to take a stand – some would say, to adopt a rhetorical ploy. I readily accept the implications of this conscious decision on my part. For a historical perspective on the obscurity/clarity debate see Hurst 1991, pp. 9–17.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Calame 1990b, pp. 26–7.

<sup>20</sup> See Momigliano 1987, pp. 264–88.